

BRITISH MEDICAL AID IN SPAIN

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**The story of
THE BRITISH MEDICAL AID UNIT
in SPAIN**

*Issued for SPANISH MEDICAL AID COMMITTEE,
24 New Oxford Street, W.C.1*



Leaving Victoria Station, August 23, 1936



Last August when a few of us decided that something must be done to give medical aid to sufferers in the Spanish Civil War, there were pessimists who told us that we would never get enough support because the people of Britain were not sufficiently interested in what was happening in Spain. It did not take long to prove that these pessimists were wrong.

Within three days £1,500 had been raised, mostly in small donations coming from all over the country, and before a fortnight had elapsed preparations were complete for sending the 1st Ambulance Unit to Spain.

This was but the beginning of a magnificent response. It has enabled us to send out ten ambulances and nearly fifty persons including skilled doctors and nurses.

We are continually receiving requests for drugs, surgical instruments and medical supplies of all kinds, but naturally the amount of help we are able to give depends entirely on the amount of money we receive.

It is necessary that the flow of contributions be kept up steadily. We are anxious to have sympathisers pledge themselves to make regular weekly or monthly subscriptions, though of course we shall always welcome donations from those who simply give us what they can when they can.

Remember—the work of all members of the Unit is voluntary and every penny you give goes to help the people of Spain.



Eye Witness Account

This account of 24 hours with the Medical Aid Unit at Grañen on the Aragon front was written for this pamphlet by a woman journalist who has been touring Spain as an eye-witness of the Civil War.

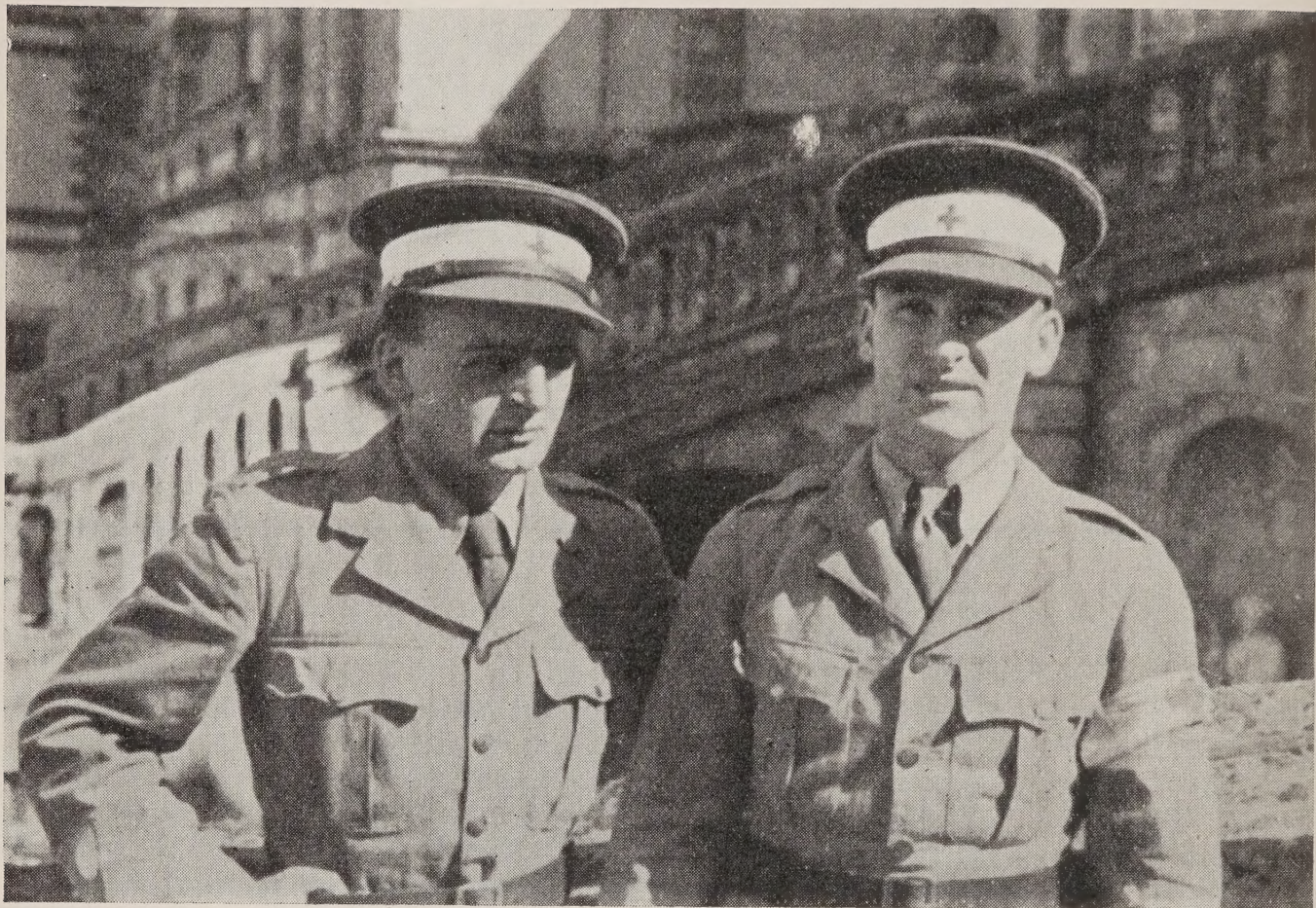


With not a light showing, the train crawled cautiously through the night on its way from Barcelona to the village behind the lines on the Huesca front where the British Medical Aid Unit is established.

The village station was dark, too, for the place was well within bombing range, but a question shouted to dimly seen figures in curious Spanish capes brought us the answer that this place was Grañen and the “Hospital Inglès” not far away.

Hoisting my knapsack, I stumbled and slithered up the muddy road—these roads in the Spanish countryside are pretty bad, they must have a severe effect on the ambulance tyres and springs!—until I came to a massive door which was presently opened by the sentry on duty.

Across a courtyard and up a stone staircase to a great bare hall. Its gloomy shadows were filled with all sorts of people—men of the Loyalist Militia, old peasant women with bundles of treasured possessions, groups of frightened little children (those most pathetic refugees of civil war), and finally the ambulance unit members, men in khaki shirts and shorts, girls in blue overalls and nurses in white. The Hospital Inglès is a typical



Two members of the Unit

There are ten ambulances in operation



The Hospital Inglès is an old farm-house

old Spanish farm-house, that rambles about in a confusing fashion and is by no means the most suitable of premises for a hospital—but it was the best that could be granted in this district.

Up again to one of the staff dormitories—a loft with mattresses and stretchers lying on the floor—and, after leaving my knapsack, downstairs to a terrace and along a dark winding passage.

At last I emerged into a brightly-lit room with a long trestle table running down the centre—the dining room. A boisterous crowd welcomed me in several languages—mainly English, of course, but also Spanish, French, and German.

“What’s the news in Barcelona?” . . . “Is it true about the Soviet Note?” . . . “Are they going to stop non-intervention at last?” . . . “What is France going to do about it?”—and so on, till bed-time, when with candles, we followed the winding corridors again.

I asked if I could have a wash. Loud laughter! Water has to be fetched from four miles away. And that is only one of the difficulties that are being faced and overcome by the people at Grañen with real English ingenuity, as I was to discover next day.

Before getting to sleep I had my first experience of the Unit at work.

1 a.m. . . .

The telephone bell screams through the silence.

A call for the ambulance.

Two men and a nurse are detailed for duty. Off they go.

“Well, cheerio.”

“Cheerio.”

It means another night’s sleep gone, and it may mean death . . .

Lurching over the cobbles of the courtyard, the ambulance tears off on its errand of mercy.

Every night last week the ambulances were summoned into the mountains along roads that are little more than cow tracks—only acrobatic driving can get a car through. There is really no front line here, for the forces fight in scattered groups, so that it is very easy to run into enemy country. The danger of this is all the greater for the English drivers because they do not know much Spanish.

Trenches are no defence against machine-gunning from the air

As a rule, they pick up a Spanish guide at the base from which the call was sent, but several times when there has been no-one available, they have gone with nothing more to guide them probably than a garbled name, and have taken the risk of being shot down in the dark by the patrols, who are naturally jumpy and who might not understand the driver's two words of Spanish, "Ambulancia Inglesa," his only answer to a challenge.

Once when aeroplanes started machine-gunning down the street the men crawled under their ambulance, but then, remembering the danger of a bullet in the petrol tank, they scuttled for a house. After a while, growing accustomed to the rattle of the guns, they decided to go on.

In the outskirts of the town, they saw a terrible sight: over the hill and down the road came a long line of Loyalists supporting and carrying wounded, while every two minutes rebel 'planes zoomed down and swept them with machine-guns. Trenches that are little more than scoops in the ground are no defence against machine-gunning from the air. No human being could stand up under this rain of fire, and the troops were forced to retire temporarily. With the first lull, however, though their ammunition was running low, they flowed back in a great wave.

As the ambulance drew up to the wounded, each man waved them on: "I can get along; there's a worse one further back . . ."

Another story I heard that night was about the wounding of Margot Miller, an Australian girl serving as a nurse.

Within a mile or so of the outskirts of Huesca a fierce battle was going on. Nurse Miller was with a party sent out by the Hospital for first aid dressings. (Men who are only slightly injured often refuse to leave the line so that the unit must treat them on the spot.) She was running to the help of a wounded militia man, when suddenly a machine-gun opened fire and she was wounded in the legs. Nevertheless, she managed to stumble to shelter in a ditch.

From the front line, 60 yards ahead, a group of Loyalists came running to her aid with a stretcher, so they had to carry her at a run for about 200 yards—under rebel fire.

Little Juanita's feet were not for dancing

Fortunately, Nurse Miller's wounds were not serious, and she is back at duty once more.

I was told of a very charming sequel to the incident.

An Andalusian member of the loyal militia, on hearing that the Australian girl had shed blood on the battlefield of Spanish democracy, vowed that when peace is restored he will plant a rose bush on the spot where she "who came to Spain to aid her brothers, the heroes of the people," was wounded.

Every now and then comes a story like this with its grace and chivalry to relieve the horrors of war.

When morning came, I was able to get a better conception of the work being done at Grañen.

And what a glorious morning it was. The village lies in an open plain with great mountains bounding it all round—such solemn and peaceful mountains that war seems very far off.

But there is war and very near, right here in quiet Grañen. There are not many wounded this morning, but there are dozens more refugees.

For all who seek its aid, the British hospital is ready to do what it can.

There are many sad sights to be seen in Grañen, but the saddest of all, I think, is the suffering of the little children and of the old people.

If you could have seen one little girl who arrived that morning from a village in the mountains. . . "She is the best dancer in all the village" her mother said proudly.

But little Juanita's feet that morning were not for dancing. They were swollen and bleeding from her long trek barefoot away from the home that was threatened by war.

Only seriously wounded men are detained long here, for it is what is called an evacuation hospital. After the men have their wounds dressed, they are sent off daily by train to the base hospitals. There are only 25 beds or, at a pinch with the use of stretchers, 40. And some even of the severe cases cannot be properly treated here because the equipment needed is lacking—X-ray for instance.



Wounded being evacuated from Grañen

The Unit's ambulances have travelled 15,000 miles to and from the Front



Four miles for clean water

Then, though miracles have been done in renovating the old house, it is not, as I have said, the place you would choose in peacetime for a hospital.

First of all, it had to be cleaned very thoroughly, and that was no easy job when water had to be fetched by cart from the river four miles away. There is a well in the garden, but it is contaminated and cannot be used.

Even the river water is muddy and often leaves a film on instruments boiled in it, so that they have to be wiped clean and sterilized once more in alcohol. That boiling has to be done on kerosene stoves.

The electric light is so dim that operations are performed by paraffin lamp. But that electric light system, dim as it is, has behind it an interesting story of resourcefulness in difficulty.

It was fixed up by a London taxi-driver.

On the morning of the 4th September, Harry Forster was busily engaged in picking-up and dropping his fares in the streets of London. The same day he left London for Barcelona, having previously volunteered for service as a driver with the Unit.

His worth was not fully realised until he had arrived at Grañen. He started by being an ambulance driver. Soon he became a mechanic. As a driver, he continually brought wounded men back from the front lines, often under shell fire, to the hospital. Then he was promoted to be Quartermaster of the Unit and in that post he soon achieved success, for he was a skilled craftsman.

He fixed up heating stoves for the sterilizers, made reflectors for the lights in the operating theatres. Working on live wire, for there was no main fuse, he overhauled and extended the lighting supply to the whole hospital. He found the best spot in the river for drawing water and arranged for its disinfection. He built a common room for the Unit out of wood and canvas and made all the furniture for it, principally out of wood which he salvaged from wrecked houses in the neighbourhood. He made beds, chairs, and tables. He made a washing machine for the laundry. He completely overhauled the equipment for the ambulances. In addition to all these duties, he did his full share as an orderly in the wards.

Fifty cases had to be examined that morning

Forster's ingenuity made the place much more livable in, but it is still a bit rough and ready. The dormitories are stone-floored rooms and there are no beds, no sheets, and no pillows. Members of the Unit sleep either on mattresses on the floor or on stretchers which are, however, likely to be requisitioned in case of emergency. For warmth they depend on sleeping bags, of which there are never sufficient. Clothes and personal property are kept in rucksacks or on the floor beside the beds.

The peace did not last long that morning in Grañen.

There had been a heavy rebel attack up the line and 50 cases (25 stretcher, 25 walking) had to be examined. All had to be evacuated, if possible, within three hours.

Each patient had to be given an anti-tetanus injection, if he had not previously had one. Quick decisions had to be made: who should be given temporary dressings, who must be held for operation. The two operating rooms could scarcely handle the rush. Each man as his dressing was completed would give the People's Front Salute and murmur "Muchos gracias." Then they were taken to the courtyard to await evacuation.

But here is one who is unable to give the salute or whisper his thanks—a fair-haired German boy, an exile from the Nazi terror fighting to save another land from Fascism, is brought in with a very bad head wound. We have not the proper instruments to perform the needed operation. He is young and strong, and if he reaches the main hospital at the base in a few hours he may survive—but there are so many wounded to-day that the train will be delayed . . .

About four o'clock in the afternoon a few of us got free enough from work to begin eating lunch. Suddenly through yells and shouts came the roar of planes, the staccato coughing of machine-guns. We made a wild dash over the fields. A loyal 'plane had been forced down in combat with three rebel bombers. We brought back the pilot, who was slightly injured. A few minutes later, from another part of the district, another pilot was brought in; this man was severely wounded.

“ Give Moorish prisoner all possible care and attention . . . ”

During all this excitement operations proceeded quietly and efficiently in the theatres.

Odd cases drifted in during the afternoon and a second evacuation train had to be ordered.

One of our patients towards evening was a Moor, taken prisoner from the rebels. This meant trouble, for some of the people in the village started grumbling when they heard that a rebel Moor was going to be treated with the same care and attention as their own wounded. Feelings run high in war, and it was difficult to convince the grumblers that a hospital cannot and ought not to bar anyone who is suffering. It is true, of course, that the Spanish Medical Aid has the support of the National Council of Labour in Britain and of the International Federation of Trade Unions in Europe : it is situated behind the loyal lines and its main purpose is to assist the democratic forces.

But here was a human being in agony. He had been thrown from his horse four days before and had lain in the open ever since. His leg was broken and had an open wound, which was gangrened. How could we refuse to help him ? An immediate operation was necessary. While preparations were being made for it, more villagers arrived to protest at the Moor being treated. But there also arrived a message from the Divisional Commander of the Loyal Militia : “ Give Moorish prisoner all possible care and attention.”

That silenced the critics and soon afterwards the operation—amputation of the leg—was performed.

This does not exhaust the story of a day’s activity at Grañen.

An important side of the hospital’s work is the general practice carried on among the villagers, for the village doctor went off at the start of the rebellion to join Franco’s forces. That day, for instance, treatment was given to the victims of a motor accident, and an operation was performed on a woman whose peritoneum was torn during childbirth. Dr. Saxton of the B.M.U. visits several patients in the village every morning, the majority being pneumonia and rheumatic cases, which are bound in the nature of things to become more numerous as winter approaches.

The chill in the evening breeze that night showed, indeed, that winter, the third combatant in this dreadful war, was not far off.

WHO'S WHO OF THE UNIT

From all parts of the country—from Scotland and Lancashire as well as the London area—and from all trades and occupations—doctors, clerks, medical students, and one taxi-driver—came the members of the Unit. Here are their names :

First Unit (left London August 23, 1936) :

Administrator : K. Sinclair-Loutit, London, W.C.1. **Doctors :** A. A. Khan, London, N.W.3., Ruth Prothero, London Lock Hospital, London, W.2. ; Randall Sollenberger, London, W. **Nurses :** Margot Miller, Parliament Hill, N.W.3. (wounded on duty) ; Thora Silverthorne, Hammersmith Hospital, W.12 ; Jean Woodifield, Hampstead, N.W.3. ; Rose Davson, London, W.9. ; D. E. Bell, South Hampstead, N.W.3. ; Nurse Bird, London, S.W.1. **Secretary :** Aileen Palmer, London, W.C. **Dressers :** Archibald L. Cochrane, Portman square, W. ; Leonard J. Le Vann, Edinburgh ; Arnold Kallen, Glasgow. **Drivers :** Charles Hunt, Harlesden ; Charles James Hurling, Greenford ; Alexander Wheeler Wainman, Shipton-under-Wychwood ; Frank L. Farr, London, N.4 ; Leslie Preger, Victoria Park, Manchester ; Harry Forster, London, W.9. **Quartermasters :** Emmanuel Julius, London, W.1. (joined Loyal Militia and was killed in action) ; Hugh O'Donnell, Edgware, Middlesex ; William Belcher, Camden Town, N.W.1.

Reinforcements of First Unit :

Doctors : Reginald Somes Saxton, Reading ; Max Langer, Vienna VIII. **Nurses :** Mary Elizabeth Slater, Preston, Lancs. ; Alice Garton, Gloucester ; Susannah Allan Sutor, Monte Carlo ; Annie Cargill Murray, Edinburgh ; Elsie Aspinall, Wembley ; Gwendolen Mary E. Williams, Stoke-on-Trent. **Orderlies :** Keith Howard Andrews, Kilburn, N.W.6. ; Clare Jones, Edmonton. **Drivers :** Charles George Franklin Bing, Ilford ; Thomas Reginald Perry-Poole, Reading ; Gordon Davidson, S.W.11.

Second Unit :

Quartermaster : Captain James Robert White, Whitehall, Belfast, Ireland. **Assistants :** Dennis Edgar Prout, London, S.E.15 ; Mrs. de Urquidi, London, S.W. **Drivers :** H. A. Verstage, London, S.E.23 ; George Arthur Byland, London, S.E.22 ; Thomas Alfred Steward, Tottenham, N.17 ; Jack Stone, London, N.4 ; Patrick Hill, London, N.W.1.

Of the 44 persons whose names are given above, ten have either returned to England or gone to serve in hospitals in other parts of Spain. All, however, have given splendid service to the Medical Aid Unit.

The 34 who remain require our constant support.

The Formation of the Unit and the story of its organisation



The Spanish Medical Aid Committee is formed

Given less than 24 hours' notice, doctors, medical students and nurses, and a few other interested persons, met in London on Saturday, August 8th to consider the urgent problem of providing medical help in Spain. At this meeting the Spanish Medical Aid Committee was formed. Two days later the work of preparing a unit to go to the war fronts was commenced.

The President of the Committee was the Rt. Hon. Christopher Addison, M.D., F.R.C.S. ; Viscount Churchill, Viscountess Hastings and Professor J. R. Marrack were elected joint Treasurers, with Dr. H. B. Morgan as Chairman, and Dr. Charles Brook of the London County Council as Secretary. Dr. Somerville Hastings is Vice-Chairman.

Besides interviewing those who had volunteered for service and arranging for the purchase of the necessary equipment, the Committee had to face probably its most important task—that of raising funds.

The Public Response

But the great fight that the people of Spain were making to save democracy had gripped the imagination of the British public. From all classes, in fact from all parties, came offers of help. On August 14th, at a memorable meeting at the Friends' House, £500 was raised.

This response encouraged the Committee to make even bolder plans. It was decided to form a large unit capable of establishing and maintaining a clearing station or small field hospital.

Only a fortnight after the first meeting was called the Unit left London on the first stage of its journey to Spain.

It consisted of four doctors, five administrative and quartermaster staff, six nurses, and five dressers and orderlies. Later, six additional drivers were added. For all these volunteers, uniforms, kit, camp equipment and—unhappy commentary on the bestiality of modern war—thirty gas masks (costing £4 each) had to be provided. Thus was swallowed the first £500.

Then there were the medical supplies.

Surgical equipment, to provide for the establishment of a base hospital and for the performance of two major operations simultaneously, was purchased most economically for £500. 2,000 doses of anti-tetanus serum had to be acquired, at a cost of nearly £200. Anaesthetics and antiseptics, of which there was a desperate shortage in Spain, had to be bought.

The French help on the work

The Unit halted in Paris, where various formalities had to be gone through, three new lorries bought, material overhauled and supplemented. The whole of the equipment, as well as rations for the Unit were packed in these motor vehicles, which were specially constructed so that they could be transformed at short notice into mobile field ambulances.

Much of the burden of this work fell to Viscount Churchill and Mr. Sinclair-Loutit, the administrator, but they were helped considerably by French sympathisers. How anxious the French were to help can be illustrated by one incident: when the Unit's baggage arrived at Paris, the station porters, giving the Popular Front salute, refused the legal charges.

But even with such co-operation, these few days in Paris were charged with worry and anxiety. Passports had to be seen to and Customs arrangements made, there were comings and goings from the embassies; in fact, some members of the Unit worked 20 hours a day, and one night they had no sleep at all.

The Unit leaves for Spain

But by Friday August 28th almost everything was ready, and watched by large crowds, four ambulances, fully equipped and staffed, each with two drivers, left on their long journey to the stricken fields of Spain.

The remaining personnel left Paris by train on the following day, arriving in Barcelona on Sunday evening. The ambulances—after one had been involved in an accident, and the two drivers treated in hospital—reached Barcelona on the Wednesday. Spanish workers assembled in the streets gave them an enthusiastic welcome.

Now began the real work of the Unit. The medical and nursing staff visited hospitals, homes for refugee children, barracks, factories and so on—being much impressed by the way the Government had met the emergencies of the situation—and then, on Thursday September 3rd, leading officers of the party were conducted to the Aragon front.

Here they met military chiefs, visited villages along the line, and finally decided to establish a hospital in a farm house at the village of Grañen, 18 kilometres behind the Huesca section of the front. The advantage of Grañen was that it lies at the railhead for Barcelona and Lerida, and at the junction of many roads from sectors of the fighting lines.

The farm house could not be said to be ideal for the purpose. It was old, dilapidated and insanitary, but as it was the only likely accommodation available, an advance party was sent to clean it and convert it so far as possible to its new use and to instal about 25 beds. They had not been there more than a few hours when thirty wounded men arrived for treatment.

The first patients treated on the Aragon Front

Working at all hours, showing self-sacrificing devotion and at times real heroism, the Unit's staff set about their task of lessening the toll of war. During their first month they treated 811 patients, and their ambulances were constantly under fire on their many journeys to the Front. After the wounded had been treated at Grañen they were evacuated to the station and placed in hospital trains for Barcelona and Sarinona.

It was a tremendous task, but the Unit tackled it magnificently. Their urgent appeals for further help were answered by the despatch of three more ambulances, while three doctors, eight trained nurses and orderlies and six skilled drivers were added to the personnel. Large quantities of surgical equipment were also sent.

In its work at the Front, the Unit is helped by local committees. But it must be remembered that the Spanish Government is sorely pressed, and its own resources are limited. More, and yet more help, is needed from sympathisers in this country : medical supplies are urgently required.



The Unit at work on the Aragon Front



*The Archbishop of York
wishes the unit God speed*



I had heard with very great interest and sympathy of the formation of the Spanish Medical Aid Committee, and should like to say how warmly I approve its aims. I trust it will obtain the support which it needs for its work of mercy.

WILLIAM EBOR



What you can do to help



The Unit tends the wounded on both sides. The staff do not ask a man's politics before they give him care and attention. Voluntarily, without asking a penny in return, the Unit is aiding a whole people who in this crisis of history are desperately in need. The more help it gets, the more it can help.

As the war goes on, more drugs, dressings, antiseptics, anæsthetics, and so on will be needed. New ambulances must replace those worn out by arduous service on the rough country roads. And a new ambulance will cost £800.

In addition to all the other needs of the hospital, ample supplies of blankets and warm woollen clothing must be sent out for the staff itself and for distribution among the men, women and children, who are suffering in Spain.

And for all this money is needed. To maintain the Unit in its present state of efficiency costs £500 *a month*. And every penny contributed is spent on easing the sufferings of Spain. By the end of November about £5,000 had been expended on vital necessities. The costs of administration are negligible, and not one penny has been wasted.



Listen ! You have never known before how much £1 can do.

£1 will keep two operating tables at work for a whole hour at Grañen—two operating tables, with the services of doctors, nurses, orderlies and attendants.

The wounded wait. Doctors, nurses orderlies, attendants are ready to give their devoted service. The wounded wait—wait for us to do our smaller part.

In one hour many lives can be saved, many men made whole who would otherwise be crippled. Lives and limbs of heroes in our keeping—for £1 . . .

We search about for what we can do so that the wounded may wait no longer. One thing is open to us : it is to give—to *give until it hurts*.

Will you pledge to subscribe a regular sum every week or every month ?

To those who can afford it we appeal for an hour's support every week.

But every minute helps. Buy your minute if you can give no more than 4d., but make it a minute every week !

Every penny helps to save a human life in the great struggle of the Spanish people for democratic liberty.



The wounded wait

Give until it hurts ...

*To the Treasurer,
SPANISH MEDICAL AID COMMITTEE,
24, New Oxford Street, W.C.1.*

I am enclosing
in support of Medical Aid in Spain

Cheque/P.O. for

£ ——— s. ——— d.

*I further pledge myself to subscribe
regularly every week to the Fund the sum of*

£ ——— s. ——— d.

Signature _____

Address _____

Date _____

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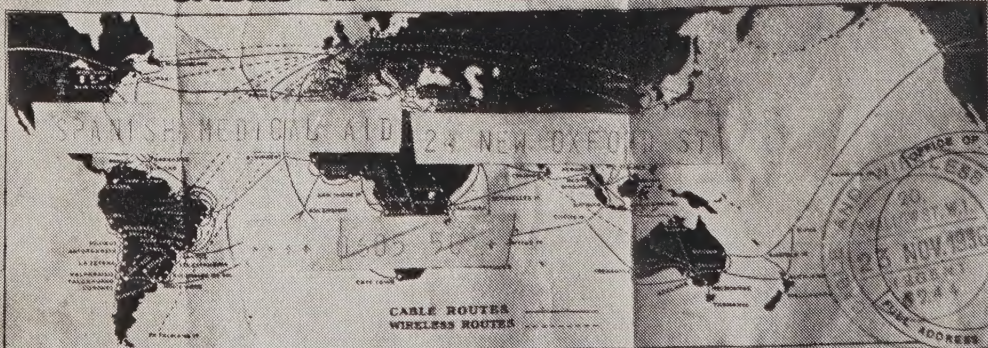
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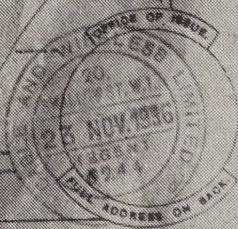
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